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A first-of-its-kind military hospital will be named after a famed astronaut with Lake County ties when it opens in North Chicago in 2010, officials announced this week.

The Capt. James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center will be the nation's first joint Veterans Affairs/Navy hospital, said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park. It honors Lake Forest's Lovell, who flew two missions to the moon, including the ill-fated Apollo 13.

"We wanted to make sure we named the institution after someone who would be recognized and give inspiration to veterans, especially young people," said Kirk, a longtime advocate for the VA facility.

Earlier this week, Lovell said he is "truly honored and humbled to have my name associated with this great institution, (which) will provide essential care for both veteran and active duty military personnel."

The dedication formally will be announced at 1 p.m. today during a ceremony at the North Chicago VA Medical Center, which will merge with the nearby Great Lakes Naval Station's hospital to create the new facility.

Lovell, 79, will be on hand, as will Kirk, representatives from the Navy, the acting Veterans Affairs secretary and other dignitaries.

Actor Gary Sinise, a Chicago-area native who co-starred in the blockbuster movie about the Apollo 13 mission, is set to speak, too. Sinise later will perform for the troops at Great Lakes with his musical group, the Lt. Dan Band.

Lovell is best known for commanding the 1970 Apollo 13 flight, which suffered a crippling malfunction in space but returned safely to Earth. He also was a Navy test pilot and combat pilot whose decorations include two Navy Distinguished Flying Crosses and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award.

His first trip to the moon was 1968's Apollo 8 mission, a flight that had a profound experience on Kirk as a child.

"He read from the book of Genesis on Christmas Eve," Kirk said, recalling the crew's broadcast from space. "It was one of the worst years in our country's history, and you could feel the mood of the country being lifted."

The name-selection process, which involved the Defense and VA departments, took 2½ years, Kirk said. The astronaut always was Kirk's top choice, he said.

North Chicago VA spokesman Doug Shouse said Lovell is a fitting honoree.

"It makes a lot of sense to have a local person who (also was) a Navy aviator," Shouse said. "And he's also a veteran."

In addition to honoring Lovell, today's ceremony marks another important chapter in the VA hospital's history.

Less than a decade ago, federal officials announced funding woes could prompt significant service cuts at the hospital. But local lawmakers and veterans fought the plan and eventually brokered a deal to merge the facility with Great Lakes' hospital.

Work began on the latest phase of the \$130 million project this summer: a new parking garage, hospital entrance and ambulatory care center.

When completed in October 2010, the Lovell Center will serve an estimated 100,000 veterans, active-duty recruits or troops and civilian relatives annually, Kirk said.

Plans call for the Navy facility to be demolished the following year.